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1 In the spring of 1936, at the behest of Alfred Barr, director of the young Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, museum librarian Beaumont Newhall undertook the task of creating an exhibition of the history of photography. In *Photography 1839–1937*, which opened a year later, Newhall amassed 841 items to survey the first one hundred years of the medium and its aesthetic possibilities – a comprehensive range of photographic objects and equipment, along with didactic displays.

2 To understand Newhall's curatorial motivations, the natural place to turn is the essay he wrote for the exhibition catalogue outlining the 'standards of criticism generic to photography.'[1] This essay and the book that it later became, *History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present*, are considered the most influential treatment of the topic in North America. The essay alone has been used as evidence of Newhall's position as an advocate of straight photography, or, where scholars have addressed the exhibition, the selection of objects has been seen to validate the medium-specific modernist thrust of the narrative.

3 There is another source, however, that has been overlooked in discussions of Newhall, this exhibition, and his history of photography: ideas about the machine aesthetic prevalent in the 1930s. These ideas made their way to Newhall through two key figures: photographer Paul Strand and MoMA's director Alfred Barr. Not only did the machine aesthetic give Newhall a language through which he could claim photography as an art form with a distinct set of visual characteristics, it also enabled Newhall to dissociate the photographer from the photograph – artist from art – and thereby count a broader range of works as significant, even as they did not cleave to straight photography's aesthetic ideals, the ideals he espoused in the catalogue essay.

4 Indeed, in evaluating the photographs as a whole, and measuring them against the essay, it becomes clear that the essay does not adequately account for everything. How, for instance, do three aerial photographs of a bombing in progress during World War I occupy the same realm as Edward Weston's view of sand dunes in Oceano, California? The formal resonances are obvious but otherwise the images have little in common. Indeed, there is a disjunction between the ideas Newhall puts forward in his essay and the works he selected for the exhibition.

The Exhibition

5 The exhibition opened on March 17, 1937. It occupied all four floors of the brownstone at 11 West 53 Street. Visitors were greeted in the front lobby by what Newhall describes as a 'huge box camera,' approximately 2.5 x 3 x 3 meters – large enough to walk into – outfitted with a lens and a sheet of ground glass, on which people could watch the upside-down image of others walking into the museum.[2] An eye-catching graphic designed by Herbert Matter, juxtaposing two images – an engraving of a daguerreotypist at work with his large camera and a photograph of a contemporary man holding a hand camera – heralded the entrance to the galleries.

6 The installation featured 'atmosphere rooms,' each with a distinct wall color, like 'morocco leather' brown or dark blue, to create a mood for each historical period and type of photograph.[3] Daguerreotypes and other cased objects were installed in vitrines, while prints were matted – often in groups – and either framed or hung directly on the wall. Objects such as cameras, daguerreotype processing equipment, and even a nineteenth-century dark tent, for preparing and developing glass plate negatives, were scattered throughout.[4]

7 The exhibition and its catalogue were generally warmly received by the press.[5] However, writing for the *New Yorker*, Lewis Mumford expressed some reservations:

> 'Perhaps it is a little ungrateful for me to suggest that the Museum of Modern Art has begun to overreach itself in the matter of documentation ... What is lacking in the present exhibition is a weighing and an assessment of photography in terms of pure aesthetic merit – such an evaluation as should distinguish a show in an art museum from one that might be held, say, in the Museum of Science and Industry.'[6]

8 Mumford makes clear that it is the role of museums to evaluate works of art and present those that are of 'aesthetic merit': such an evaluation was absent, to his mind, in Newhall's show.

9 Scholars have noted a variety of sources for Newhall's exhibition and history: Heinrich Schwarz's book on Scottish photographer David Octavius Hill; Paul Sachs' museum studies course at Harvard; an interest in avant-garde cinema; the precedent of the 1929 Stuttgart exhibition, *Film und Foto*; and the presence of former Bauhaus *meister* László Moholy-Nagy on Newhall's exhibition advisory committee.[7] In general, these studies characterize Newhall's approach as a typically modernist one, something that becomes evident after a few decades' remove. But in 1936, as he undertook this project, Newhall's position was not necessarily as fixed as we now understand it.

10 In researching and preparing for the exhibition, Newhall worked with an advisory committee, who provided expertise as well as access to private and corporate collections. It was a heterogeneous group, which included Alexey Brodovitch, art director, *Harper's*

Bazaar; C.E. Kenneth Mees, director of research, Eastman Kodak Company; the aforementioned Moholy-Nagy; Charles Peignot, director, *Arts et métiers graphiques*; Paul Rotha, director of production, Strand Film Company, Ltd; D.A. Spencer, president, Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain; and Edward Steichen, who was then chief photographer for Condé Nast Publications.[8]

11 Newhall ultimately chose to divide photography's first century into three periods with a short preamble dealing with the time 'Before Photography': 'Primitive Photography' (1839–1851), 'Early Photography' (1851–1914), and 'Contemporary Photography' (1914–onwards). His account of the medium of photography from its inception to 1937 is largely a description of successive technological developments and what he believes these developments make possible in terms of photographic representation.[9] The exhibition followed this structure. Newhall moves from daguerreotypes and calotypes, to the collodion process, and on to the dry plate, the development of the hand-held camera, and roll film. He includes notable examples of all these processes by known practitioners, like William Henry Fox Talbot, Matthew Brady, Eugène Atget, and Berenice Abbott, and some lesser known, such as, Nora Dumas and Peter Sekaer, and some completely unknown. He also includes many 'firsts' as key moments – for example, the first direct photographic reproduction printed in a newspaper.

12 This chronology of technological innovation finally arrives at Newhall's contemporary moment, from the 1910s to the 1930s. Here, he broadens his account to reflect the multiplicity of the photography of the day and includes press photography, scientific photography, and moving pictures. Alongside works by the notable living photographers of the period, such as, Walker Evans, Margaret Bourke-White, László Moholy-Nagy, and Henri Cartier-Bresson, there were photographs credited to unknown makers, to companies or institutions, like the Eastman Kodak Company, McLaughlin Aerial Surveys, and the American Expeditionary Forces, or to film crews, including the producer, the director, and the cinematographer.

13 What does a stroboscopic photograph of a milk drop from the 1930s have in common with an 1852 calotype of the west portal of the Cathedral of Chartres, or a film still from Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* with a press photograph of a boxing match? This is not an easy question to answer. The sheer volume of the material, the breadth of the kinds of photographs included, seems to overwhelm Newhall's project, not least to defy easy assimilation.

14 The history of photography as set out by Newhall in his catalogue essay is one that owes much of its character to the art history taught at Harvard in the early decades of the twentieth century by Charles Eliot Norton and later Paul J. Sachs. The program trained students to privilege a work's physical attributes over social and/or psychological context and stressed the continuity of art through time as an evolving succession of representations, as well as fostering the notion of the 'rebellious genius' as art's prime innovator.[10] In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the United States, several fields came into their own as modernist art theory and criticism crystallized – the discipline of art history, the history of photography, and the museum profession.[11] It is little wonder, then, that these elements of the art profession later came to be seen as complicit.

15 First published in *October* in 1982, Christopher Phillips's essay 'The Judgment Seat of Photography,' marked a turning point in thinking about Newhall. Phillips understood the breadth of Newhall's selections in terms of a larger institutional impulse, and saw this

'museumization' of photography as evidence of an agenda of 'reordering photography along lines consistent with the conventional aims of the art museum.' Subjecting photography to the 'transfiguring gaze of art's institutional guardian: the museum' was a negative turn of events for Phillips, one that ignored photography's inherent reproducibility and transformed photographs into precious original art objects.[12]

16 In his 2001 *Art Bulletin* article, 'History of Photography: The State of Research,' Douglas Nickel suggested that Newhall's primary interest was in the contemporary photography of his day and cast Newhall's account of the medium as a teleological justification for the photographic practice of the 1930s in the United States. Out of the 841 works in Newhall's historic show, Nickel showed, 40 percent belonged to the category 'Contemporary Photography.'[13] Nickel is right here but only partially. Yes, Newhall was casting back to find a tradition and, yes, Newhall was particularly concerned with contemporary photography. However, he was not solely interested in contemporary photography as 'straight photography,' whose 'aesthetic ideal was monolithic: sharp focus, a full range of tones, clarity of detail, no darkroom trickery'[14] – it in fact encompassed much more.

17 In the introduction to the final section of the essay, Newhall wrote:

> 'The period following the World War was one of general experimentation in the arts. Rebellion against academic standards all but became a convention in itself. The esthetic principles evolved in the early 1920s affected photography. Realizing how successfully the camera can record the past and enlarge our vision, certain photographers gave up their efforts to have photography recognized as a fine art and undertook to exploit its special potentialities. They saw possibilities in the medium which had heretofore been neglected.'[15]

18 Under 'Contemporary Photography' Newhall devotes a section to each of the applications that he feels fulfills photography's 'special potentialities': shadowgraphs, photographic perspective, straight photography, miniature cameras, 'candid' photography, news photography, color photography, scientific photography, and moving pictures. Taken together, this represents 489 objects, or 58 percent of the works in the exhibition – an undeniable weighting of the exhibition to the contemporary.

19 And while the rhetoric of the quoted passage is consistent with Newhall's art historical training, leaving the impression that the objects in this section belong to an account of individuals acting with artistic intention, there are in fact a significant number of objects in the exhibition that do not follow this narrative. There are 85 photographs made by unknown makers, 56 photographs credited to companies or institutions, and 44 film stills. Together, this is a total of 185 photographs, 22 percent of the show, that do not actually fit Newhall's narrative of individual artistic intent. With this statistical evidence, it is not useful to think of Newhall as attempting to present a narrow and coherent narrative of art photography – the number and variety of works in the exhibition stand as a clear rebuke to that assumption.

20 Phillips also identified precedents for Newhall's show, such as the 1929 *Film und Foto* exhibition in Stuttgart that placed an emphasis on all of photography's applications and, by implication, the technology that made those applications possible. The comprehensive nature of the MoMA exhibition clearly bore a similarity to such European exhibitions, which is not surprising given the involvement of Moholy-Nagy, a proponent of *fotokunst*, the art of the camera.[16] However, it is only in a footnote that Phillips elaborates: 'These joint showings of scientific, commercial, and creative "new vision" photography and film *placed the camera at the center of the postwar technological aesthetic* in Germany.'[17]

21 More than footnote material, this statement is rather the key to understanding Newhall's project. Like his European predecessors, Newhall makes the camera itself the unifying factor of his exhibition. Only then can he claim that the aesthetic properties of photography were technologically based and, thus, distinct from other kinds of picture making.[18] Moreover, because the camera determines these properties, it would also allow him to claim a broader range of photographs as significant and worthy of inclusion in a museum exhibition, whether or not they adhered to the tenets of straight photography.

22 Ideas about the machine, its ability to create beauty, and its role in the cultural sphere were commonplace among the art intelligentsia of the 1930s.[19] Newhall engaged with these ideas first through the writings of photographer Paul Strand.

The Machine Aesthetic: Paul Strand

23 Newhall and Strand met in 1936 when Newhall approached the photographer to lend some of his work to the MoMA exhibition. Although Strand had reservations about the ambitious scope of Newhall's project, he agreed to let Newhall choose thirteen photographs for the exhibition, dating from 1928 to 1933, mostly landscape and architecture views from Quebec, Maine, Mexico and New Mexico.[20] Strand's work clearly held special appeal to Newhall, since this represents, matched only by Moholy-Nagy, the largest number of prints by any known living photographer in the exhibition. Strand is superseded only by Matthew Brady, with twenty-one photographs, and Eugène Atget, with nineteen photographs, three scrapbooks, and an album.

24 Newhall recounts in his memoir that during this first meeting Strand also cheekily offered his own version of an exhibition to represent the history of photography. He said: 'Well this is what you ought to do. The first floor should be all David Octavius Hill. The second floor should be Eugène Atget. Give the third floor completely to Alfred Stieglitz. And on the fourth floor you should have Strand.'[21]

25 This narrative first appears in Strand's 1921 article 'Alfred Stieglitz and a Machine.'[22] Three key things are laid out in this piece: Strand equates the camera with the machine; he insists that this machine produces only one legitimate type of product, or photograph, although these photographs can express the distinct vision of different photographers – a machine aesthetic; and, in his narrow slice through its history, he efficiently traces a lineage of this machine aesthetic in photography.

26 By this time, Strand was already an acknowledged leader of straight photography – Strand's mentor Stieglitz devoted a solo exhibition at his gallery 291 as well as the last issue of his journal, *Camera Work*, in June 1917, to Strand's photographs. In his influential essays of the late 1910s and 1920s, Strand theorized photography's 'uniqueness of means.' [23] Building on the writings of other photographers, like Stieglitz and Frederick Evans, who argued that photography should not aspire to art – that is, painting – he was the first to clearly articulate the characteristics of this new 'straight' aesthetic in photography, and crystallized its new vocabulary. These ideas can be found most vividly in Strand's two pieces 'Photography' (1917) and 'Photography and the New God' (1922).[24] In the former he argues that it is only in embracing its 'complete uniqueness of means,' that photography could find its '*raison d'être*,' its 'absolute unqualified objectivity.'[25] He claims that the camera itself dictates these unique characteristics, which he understands as the medium's limits. Visually, this means sharp focus throughout the picture plane, clear organization

of details, a full tonal range from white to black, and as little apparent darkroom manipulation as possible.

27 More than a simple checklist of formal attributes, however, these characteristics exemplify the photographer's approach to what is before the camera: that is, objectivity. The photographs that result from this formal, emotional, and intellectual approach are 'untouched products of an intelligence and spirit channeling through a machine.'[26] Strand elaborates further: 'In the work of Stieglitz there is always a full acceptance of the thing in front of him, the objectivity which the photographer must control and can never evade.'[27] 'Control' is the operative word here. He continues: 'Now in all of this it should be well understood, that the machine is a passive and innocent party. The control of its mechanism and materials, the fineness and sensitivity of its accomplishment are those of man.'[28]

28 In describing the camera as 'passive and innocent,' Strand reduces it to a tool and maintains the photographer's creative supremacy. More than this, however, Strand argues that the camera is a tool that can be put to artistic use, a use that ultimately benefits contemporary humanity. He proposes a new Trinity: 'God the Machine, Materialistic Empiricism the Son, and Science the Holy Ghost.'[29] In this new scenario, knowledge (materialistic empiricism) comes to humanity through the machine, through the camera. This positions the photographer as the one who mediates with the machine, and making photographs becomes a spiritual, almost mystical, exercise. Strand goes even further to argue that photography practiced with objectivity will actually transform, or humanize, the machine. He believes it will supersede 'all Trinities and all Gods' to unify humanity, and he sees the photographer as the leader, the seer:

> 'And so it is again the vision of the artist, of the intuitive seeker after knowledge, which, in this modern world, has seized upon the mechanism and materials of a machine, and is pointing the way ... He has evolved through the conscious creative control of this particular phase of the machine a new method of perceiving the life of objectivity and of recording it ... The photographer has joined the ranks of all true seekers after knowledge, be it intuitive and aesthetic or conceptual and scientific. He has moreover, in establishing his own spiritual control over a machine, the camera, revealed the destructive and wholly fictitious wall of antagonism which these two groups have built up between themselves.'[30]

29 This passage has the ring of much avant-garde writing from the 1920s: a programmatic, exhortative tone, and a sincere belief in the machine's, and the machine aesthetic's, ability to revolutionize society, to destroy the 'wall of antagonism.' Beyond Strand's Marxist convictions, these sentiments belong to a wider movement, calling for the acceptance and assimilation of the machine in the cultural realm. In 1929, commenting on one of Strand's own photographs of a machine, critic Harold Clurman wrote in *Creative Art:*

> ' ... the Strand machine seems not only the perfect image of a machine, but of a machine that in some mysterious ways has itself become conscious of its own admirable and independent life, its own elegance of line, of suave hardness, and density of substance. The machine looks out upon us calmly exultant in the knowledge of its own consummate organism.'[31]

30 Strand's ideas quickly became the way to talk about photographs, and more than fifteen years after their publication, as Newhall was putting his exhibition together, they had become received wisdom. Newhall echoes aspects of them in his essay. For instance, when he refers to the 'straightforwardness' of Eugène Atget's photographs of Paris streets, he is leaning on Strand's concept of objectivity. The idea that the photographer learns to use

the camera as though it were an extension of the self is useful for Newhall. At a time when the conception of art as a beautiful product channeled from an artist's mind through the hand still resonated, the only way of getting around the problem of photography, then, was to turn the camera not only into a producer of beauty but (practically) into a human being. In Strand's view, the trajectory of photography's aesthetics is inseparable from the notion of social change – he sees the prominence of Stieglitz as evidence of a possible shift in social relations. Newhall leaves this idea behind, along with Strand's polemical tone.[32]

31 In his catalogue essay, Newhall defines his project as the attempt to find 'standards of criticism generic to photography.' To do this, he proposes to examine photography 'in terms of the optical and chemical laws which govern its production.' These 'basic laws' form the backbone of his history and stem directly from Strand.[33] The thing that was most important to Newhall was that photography be judged *according to its inherent criteria* , and it is these criteria that he is attempting to discern in his essay.

32 In a subsection of 'Contemporary Photography,' titled 'The Need for Both Methods,' which discusses straight photography and photography with a hand-held camera, Newhall writes:

> 'Photographic esthetics are so closely combined with technique that it is almost impossible to separate the two. Both "straight" photography and miniature photography have a vital and significant place today. Both types are entirely conditioned by the very principles of photography; both are honest and straightforward, depending on no other graphic expression.'[34]

33 He means that the technology at hand in 1937 allowed for several ways of making photographs that embrace the 'principles of photography.' These principles take the form that Nickel describes – 'sharp focus, a full range of tones, clarity of detail, no darkroom trickery.' But these formal attributes are manifestations of a machine aesthetic, of a camera seeing. Newhall looks back through the history of photography to find evidence not of straight photography, but of this camera aesthetic, a larger category, that includes the former as but one component. The 'Contemporary Photography' section, then, no longer proffers just one inevitable endpoint for the medium but several possible directions.

34 Strand's ideas, as Newhall adapts them, are central to this task, and they become a kind of common sense about photography – the meanings of words like 'objectivity' and 'straightforwardness' come to seem obvious. But in looking at the photographs Newhall selected for his exhibition, the words and the objects do not seem to match up quite so easily. Alfred Barr's ideas about the roots of modern art elucidate this.

The Machine Aesthetic: Alfred Barr

35 Throughout the 1930s, Barr and his staff created a pace-setting series of exhibitions at MoMA, including Newhall's 1937 photography exhibition: *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* (1932); *Machine Art* (1934); *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936); *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* (1936), and *Bauhaus: 1919–1928* (1938).[35] Each exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue or book that justified the presence of these works in the museum context in rigorous art historical terms – texts that became standards in North America for decades after. The view of the machine developed in this series of

exhibitions, and the aesthetic it purported to demand, was a central thread to the narrative of art history Barr put forward.

36 According to Sybil Kantor, the 'industrial culture was the formative source for the language of abstraction and the geometry of advanced art.'[36] Conditioned by the empirical approach of the Fogg Method he learned at Harvard, Barr first notes the influence of the aesthetic of the machine-produced on the architecture of the Bauhaus. Kantor explains:

> 'He sought to wed the rationalism of the machine with its aesthetics and the purity of mathematics with the purity of form – a synergy accomplished, he suggested, by the freedom of the architect's choice. Architecture as an art superseded engineering in his aesthetic; a disciplined "taste" accompanied any technological decision as a method of International Style.'[37]

37 It is in the architect's use of industrial materials to produce what Barr saw as an aesthetic effect that he first identified the machine aesthetic.[38] Barr later placed the machine aesthetic at the center of his famous chart of modern art, created for the 1936 *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition. It is the only non-art source included in the chart, and Barr linked it to suprematism,constructivism, Bauhaus, modern architecture, De Stijl and neoplasticism, purism, futurism, and dadaism. In short, it is an important root of all the movements Barr found most vital in the 1930s.

38 In the spring of 1934, in collaboration with Philip Johnson, Barr put together the *Machine Art* exhibition.[39] The objects were divided into six categories – industrial units, household and office equipment, kitchenware, house furnishings and accessories, scientific instruments, and laboratory glass and porcelain – and marked the first time such objects had been exhibited in an art museum.

39 Barr's view of the role of the machine aesthetic in modern art is most clear in his foreword to the exhibition catalogue. He began with three quotations that provided a striking view not only of how he built his case for machine art, 'the chief design characteristic of our age,'[40] but also of ideas that were in circulation at that time.[41]

> 'By beauty of shapes I do not mean, as most people would suppose, the beauty of living figures or people, but, to make my point clear, I mean straight lines and circles, and shapes, plane or solid, made from them by lathe, ruler and square. These are not, like other things, beautiful relatively, but always and absolutely.
> –Plato: *Philebus* 51c
> 'For beauty three things are required. First, then, integrity or perfection: those things which are broken are bad for this very reason. And also a due proportion or harmony. And again clarity: whence those things which have a shining color are called beautiful.
> –St. Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 39, a. 8., quoted by Jacques Maritain in *Art et Scolastique*, Paris, 1927, page 250
> 'Industrial civilization must either find a means of ending the divorce between its industry and its "culture" or perish.
> –L.P. Jacks: *Responsibility and Culture* ' [42]

40 With this selection of quotations, Barr crystallized the link between the machine-made and the everlasting quest for ideal beauty – machine art, and modern art by implication, stands as its perfect iteration.

41 Like Strand, Barr also saw interaction with the machine as a path to humanity's salvation. But where Strand the artist saw this salvation through the *use* of the machine to break down the walls between the 'intuitive and aesthetic or conceptual and scientific,'[43] Barr the curator saw that this could be accomplished through the *contemplation* of machine

forms, through aesthetic pleasure. Barr writes, echoing Strand's notion of taking up a 'dead thing' and breathing new life into it:

> 'It is in part through the aesthetic appreciation of natural forms that man has carried on his spiritual conquest of nature's hostile chaos. Today man is lost in the far more treacherous wilderness of industrial and commercial civilization. On every hand machines literally multiply our difficulties and point our doom. If, to use L.P. Jack's phrase, we are to "end the divorce" between our industry and our culture we must assimilate the machine aesthetically as well as economically. Not only must we bind Frankenstein – but we must make him beautiful.'[44]

42 Barr saw the embodiment of this agenda in the work of French painter Fernand Léger. He wrote: 'Léger has been attacked ... for 'dehumanizing' art by mechanizing his figures; but has he not at the same time helped to humanize the machine by rendering it aesthetically assimilable?'[45]

43 What is important here is Barr's notion of the aesthetic experience: he is grafting the view of art's ability to appeal to our 'higher emotions,' a nineteenth-century idea, onto the innovative art of the twentieth century, something Newhall also did. In the case of machine art, Barr extended the notion of aesthetic contemplation as redemption or salvation to the machine-made – something of a revolutionary proposal. By turning our eyes to machine-made forms, Barr argued, we can affect the course of civilization. Modern art, with its incorporation of the machine aesthetic, is the direct route to change.

44 Two things seem to me to be at work here. Barr needs to turn machine-made objects into art to better claim them as a source for contemporary art; it is important for Barr to be able to stress the continuity of art history, its evolving succession of representations. But he is also attempting to account for the aesthetic impact of objects that are not made in the same way as, for example, a painting, objects that are not hand-made and not made with an artistic intent. With the new technologies, the definition of the maker of a machine-made object becomes problematic. It is no longer a case of someone picking up a brush and directly making a mark on a canvas; the creative process, even if it begins with a designer of some kind, now involves an intermediary, the machine.

45 Barr deals with this problem by essentially rendering the maker irrelevant. The aesthetic impact, then, derives precisely from this machine-made aspect – unity, integrity, clarity are enough. In this way, the political message becomes secondary to the aesthetic, an offshoot of aesthetic pleasure. And thus he can write:

> 'Many of the finest objects in the exhibition such as the bearing spring ... or the depth gauge ... are produced quite without benefit of the artist-designer. Their beauty is entirely unintentional – it is a by-product. Nevertheless they satisfy through their "integrity," "due proportion" and "clarity," the excellent thomistic definition of the beautiful as "that which being seen, pleases."'[46]

The History of Photography

46 Strand also notes in his 'The Art Motive in Photography' (1923) that in some cases the unintentional photograph produces a greater effect than a photograph that strives to be artistic.

47 'Compared with this so-called pictorial photography, which is nothing but an evasion of everything truly photographic, all done in the name of art and God knows what, a simple record in the National Geographic Magazine, a Druet reproduction of a painting or an

aerial photographic record is an unmixed relief. They are honest, direct, and sometimes informed with beauty, however unintentional.'[47]

48 Strand, like Barr, highlights a particular sticking point: sometimes things that are not art strike us as beautiful. Again the advent of new technologies muddies things, and the line between beautiful things and art becomes more difficult to draw. Photography, with its multitudinous applications, presented a particularly tough case. What do you do with photographs that have aesthetic impact but were not made with this intent?

49 This difficulty is made blatant in Newhall's exhibition. The idea of the camera as the common factor sits uneasily beside the idea that art is made by an artist. Strand's concept of objectivity as artistic intention channeled through intimate knowledge and use of a machine comes close to reconciling these aspects, but, at its root, objectivity is still about an artist knowing his particular medium. Newhall includes photograms or camera-less pictures in the exhibition because Moholy-Nagy made them, but also because they produce aesthetic satisfaction. The sequence of aerial shots of a World War I bombardment in progress made by an unknown photographer – photographs that only fulfill the 'camera made it' criterion – have no known originator and questionable aesthetic interest, according to Newhall's own criteria. Film stills are yet another unusual case: these images, the result of collaboration between director and photographer, were not conceived as stills – they are one part of a sequence. Newhall seems to suggest that they are nonetheless meaningful in this form, as allusions to the narrative of the film.

50 In his essay, Newhall does not address these special cases. But by claiming that the camera determines the aesthetics particular to photography, he can also claim that a photograph with no maker or an unknown maker is as significant as one made by, say, Paul Strand, simply because they are both products of a machine, a notion that photo historians and curators would wholly embrace only later.

51 While Newhall makes a significant stab at reining in a diverse and difficult group of technologies, artistic practices, and practical applications of photography in the essay, his exhibition defies coherence. It was not necessarily clear that straight photography, the aesthetic we now deem quintessentially modernist, would come to dominate modernist photography.[48] Mumford was right when he pointed out the 'overreach' in his review. He just did not understand what Newhall meant by it.

NOTES

1. Beaumont NEWHALL, *Photography 1839–1937* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1937), 41.

2. Beaumont NEWHALL, *Focus: Memoirs of a Life in Photography* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), 51.

3. Mary Anne STANISZEWSKI, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 101.

4. Beaumont NEWHALL, *Memoirs of a Life in Photography* (note 2), 52.

5. Ibid., 52–53.

6. Lewis MUMFORD, 'The Art Galleries,' *The New Yorker* (April 3, 1937): 40.

7. See Allison BERTRAND, 'Beaumont Newhall's "Photography 1839–1937": Making History,' *History of Photography* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 137–46; Marta BRAUN, 'Beaumont Newhall et l'historiographie de la photographie anglophone,' *Études photographiques* 16 (May 2005): 19–31; Douglas R. NICKEL, 'History of Photography: The State of Research,' *Art Bulletin* 83, no. 3 (September 2001): 548–58; Christopher Phillips 'The Judgment Seat of Photography,' in *The Contest of Meaning*, ed. Richard Bolton, 14–46 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); and Mary Anne STANISZEWSKI, *The Power of Display* (note 3).

8. Beaumont NEWHALL, *Photography 1839–1937* (note 1), 5. Newhall later recounted that he had first asked Alfred Stieglitz to serve as honorary chair of the committee. Stieglitz declined that request, refused to allow Newhall to dedicate the exhibition and catalogue to him, and refused to loan any works. See Beaumont NEWHALL, *Photography 1839–1937* (note 1), 47.

9. See for example, Josef Maria EDER, *History of Photography*, trans. Edward Epstean (New York: Dover, 1978) and Georges POTONNIÉE, *The History of the Discovery of Photography*, trans. Edward Epstean (New York: Tennant and Ward, 1936). For a larger discussion of this material as it relates to Newhall, see Douglas R. NICKEL, 'History of Photography: The State of Research,' *Art Bulletin* 83, no. 3 (September 2001): 548–58.

10. For a full discussion of this, see Sybil GORDON KANTOR, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002); and Gaëlle MOREL, 'Un marchand sans marché. Julien Levy et la photographie,' *Études photographiques* 21 (December 2007): 6–29.

11. Sybil GORDON KANTOR, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr.* (note 10), 85.

12. Christopher PHILLIPS, 'The Judgment Seat of Photography,' in *The Contest of Meaning*, ed. Richard Bolton, 19 (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989). Phillips's article also marked a turn in thinking about the Museum of Modern Art and the perceived institutionalization of photography.

13. Douglas R. NICKEL, 'History of Photography' (note 7), 550.

14. Ibid., 552.

15. Beaumont NEWHALL, *Photography 1839–1937* (note 1), 67–68.

16. Christopher PHILLIPS, 'The Judgment Seat of Photography' (note 12), 20. Phillips positions Moholy-Nagy's *fotokunst* opposite Alfred Stieglitz's *kunstfotografie* in typifying the main European and North American approaches to the medium. He mistakenly cites the appearance of Stieglitz's contemporary work in the 1938 revised version of the catalogue – work which did not appear in the 1937 exhibition or catalogue – as evidence of a shift in Newhall's allegiance from the European model to the North American, or even the MoMA, model. However, Newhall did want to exhibit a range of Stieglitz's work in 1937, and even dedicate the catalogue to him, but Stieglitz refused. See Beaumont NEWHALL, *Memoirs of a Life in Photography* (note 2), 53–54.

17. Christopher PHILLIPS, 'The Judgment Seat of Photography' (note 12), 42n9, emphasis mine.

18. For a wonderfully lucid dissection of conceptions of the camera's properties in the 1930s with respect to documentary style, see Olivier LUGON, *Le Style documentaire, D'August Sander à Walker Evans 1920–1945* (Paris: Macula, 2001).

19. Photographer Paul Strand noted in a 1968 letter to Van Deren Coke that 'interest in machinery was 'in the air'' in the early part of the twentieth century. See Naomi ROSENBLUM, *Paul Strand: The Early Years, 1910–1932* (Unpublished dissertation, New York: City University of New York, 1978), 65.

20. Beaumont NEWHALL, *Memoirs of a Life in Photography* (note 2), 137.

21. Ibid., 137.

22. Paul STRAND, 'Alfred Stieglitz and a Machine' in *America and Alfred Stieglitz*, ed. Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, et al., 281–85 (New York: The Literary Guild, 1934). The article was initially privately printed on the occasion of a 1921 Stieglitz exhibition at the Anderson Galleries, New

York. This narrative appears again later in 'The Art Motive in Photography,' *The British Journal of Photography* 70 (1923): 612–15. If Strand is not the first, he is certainly one of the first to put forward this particular account at this moment, the 1920s and 1930s, at which histories of the medium in the United States are beginning to coalesce.

23. Paul STRAND, 'Photography,' *The Seven Arts* (August 1917): 524.

24. Ibid., 524–25; and Paul STRAND, 'Photography and the New God,' *Broom* 3, no. 4 (1922): 252–58.

25. Paul STRAND, 'Photography' (note 23), 524.

26. Paul STRAND, 'Photography and the New God' (note 24), 257.

27. Ibid., 256.

28. Ibid., 256. Eric DE CHASSEY in his article 'Paul Strand, frontalité et engagement' (*Études photographiques* 13 (July 2003): 136–57), examines Strand's formal choices in his own work and ultimately ties them to the avant-garde painting of the day, particularly the work of Braque.

29. Paul Strand, 'Photography and the New God' (note 24), 253.

30. Ibid., 258.

31. Harold CLURMAN, quoted in Paul Strand's *Paul Strand: A Retrospective Monograph, The Years 1915–1968* (New York: Aperture, 1971), 42. Soon after, Lewis Mumford wrote *Technics and Civilization*, published in 1934 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co.), a history of the rise of mechanization, culminating in a 'third wave' wherein humanity successfully incorporates the machine in daily life. He also considers the machine's 'esthetic assimilation' in art, including a chapter called 'Photography as Means and Symbol' with images from the MoMA's 1934 *Machine Art* exhibition. Mumford includes a comprehensive bibliography. See also, for example, Sheldon CHENEY and Martha CHANDLER CHENEY, *Art and the Machine: An Account of Industrial Design in 20th-century America* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1936). For further discussion on the role of the machine aesthetic, see Terry E. SMITH, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art and Design in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Richard Guy WILSON, *The Machine Age in America 1918–1941* (New York: the Brooklyn Museum with Harry N. Abrams, 1986).

32. However, I do not read this as a simple disavowal of political ideas. Rather, I would suggest that for Newhall, as for Barr, the idea of social good is accomplished through Norton's idea that art appeals to the higher emotions to breed good taste and teach morals, a typically nineteenth-century idea that later becomes equated with a paternalistic elitism for writers like Phillips.

33. Beaumont NEWHALL, *Photography 1839–1937* (note 1), 41–42.

34. Ibid., 75.

35. See Christopher PHILLIPS, 'The Judgment Seat of Photography' (note 12), 17.

36. Sybil GORDON KANTOR, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr.* (note 10), 295.

37. Ibid., 294.

38. Ibid., 308. According to Kantor, Barr ignores the politics inherent in Bauhaus functionalism, by declaring that form does not follow function (or function does not dictate form). 'Purity of design' was the guiding principle and function was secondary: the 'ruling aesthetic choice was first originality and then restraint.' I would argue however that, like Newhall, Barr sees art and aesthetic contemplation as inherently furthering the social good.

39. Ibid., 305. Jane Heap and Margaret Anderson of the *Little Review* magazine mounted the *Machine-Age Exposition* in 1927 at New York's Steinway Exposition Hall. Kantor cites this as Barr's 'most immediate model' for his *Machine Art* show.

40. Philip JOHNSON, 'Architecture and Design Collections' in *Masters of Modern Art*, ed. Alfred Barr, 222 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1953). Quoted in Sybil GORDON KANTOR, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr.* (note 10), 308.

41. Alfred BARR, 'Foreword,' in *Machine Art*, Philip Johnson, n.p. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1934). For a further discussion of Neoplatonism in Barr's exhibition, see Jennifer

Jane MARSHALL, 'In Form We Trust: Neoplatonism, the Gold Standard, and the Machine Art Show, 1934' *Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (December 2008): 597–615.

42. A British Unitarian minister, educator and philosopher, Lawrence Pearsall Jacks (1860–1955) spent a year at Harvard as a young man in 1886 and studied under art historian Charles Eliot Norton. Jacks delivered a lecture titled 'Responsibility and Culture' at Yale as part of the Yale Lectures on the Responsibilities of Citizenship in 1924, the same year Alfred Barr began his graduate studies at Harvard. If Barr did not attend the lecture, he would have read Jacks's text in published form (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1924).

43. Paul STRAND, 'Photography and the New God' (note 24), 258.

44. Alfred BARR, 'Foreword' (note 41), n.p.

45. Quoted in Sybil GORDON KANTOR, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr.* (note 10), 306-307.

46. Alfred BARR, 'Foreword' (note 41), n.p.

47. Paul STRAND, 'The Art Motive in Photography,' *British Journal of Photography* 70 (1923): 613.

48. Although, by the time Newhall has his essay in book form in 1938, he is already tending to straight photography as the logical visual heir.

ABSTRACTS

In discussions of Beaumont Newhall, his landmark 1937 exhibition, and the history of photography that he lays out in the exhibition's catalogue, a key source remains overlooked: ideas about the machine aesthetic prevalent in the 1930s. These ideas made their way to Newhall through two key figures – photographer Paul Strand and his museum director Alfred Barr. Not only did the machine aesthetic give Newhall a language through which he could claim photography as an art form with a distinct set of visual characteristics, it also enabled Newhall, in some cases, to dissociate the photographer from the photograph – artist from art – and thereby count a broader range of works as significant, even as they did not cleave to 'straight' photography's aesthetic ideals, the ideals he espouses in the catalogue essay. Indeed, in evaluating the objects as a whole, and measuring them against the essay, it becomes clear that the essay does not adequately account for everything.

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